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Adivasi Identity And Struggles: Contemporary Challenges And Resistance In 21st Century India

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Abstract

This paper provides a detailed analysis of the nature of tribal identity in 21st-century India, including contemporary challenges and struggles as well as resistance to maintaining this identity. The study is based on the distinct socio-cultural structure of the tribal community in the Indian context, which they maintain apart from the tenets of mainstream Indian society, such as the caste system and patriarchy. The research argues that modernization, development projects, globalization and the overextraction of resources have led to serious challenges, including displacement, economic exploitation, loss of resources (such as water, forests, and land) and cultural degradation faced by tribal communities. Despite these challenges, tribal communities are showing unprecedented resilience and resistance to preserve their community identity and distinctive way of life using their traditional knowledge systems and shared history.

Keywords: Tribal Identity, Globalization, Displacement, Forest Rights, Cultural Resilience, India.

Introduction

Its distinct community identity for centuries. Their identity differs from that of mainstream society in that it is broadly egalitarian with a complete absence of the caste system which they regard as a form of racism. At the same time the patriarchal structure here is relaxed allowing women more freedom in matters such as divorce and remarriage and matriarchal tendencies are also found in some communities. Despite historical geographical isolation, current globalization, industrialization and state-sponsored development models pose unprecedented challenges to this unique identity and way of life. The most serious threat to tribal identity is the loss of control over their land, water and forests. In the name of the ideology of development, land has been acquired on a large scale for mining projects and big dams (like Sardar Sarovar) as a result of which nearly 40% of the people who have been displaced since independence belong to the tribal community. This displacement

has led to the destruction of their traditional livelihoods and cultural heritage, forcing them to become migrant laborers in cities, suffering extreme poverty and psychological trauma. Given the gravity of the situation the weak implementation of the Forest Rights Act has failed to secure their land rights. On the economic front, tribal communities are victims of deep exploitation at the hands of market forces. Traditionally they have been trapped in deep debt due to high interest rates, forcing them to mortgage their land or work as bonded labourers. In states like Jharkhand, more than a quarter of the population faces extreme poverty, and 45% of tribal groups in rural areas and 35% in urban areas live below the poverty line a direct result of malnutrition. Additionally, conservatism and social stigma have complicated their lives, as they are often portrayed as 'primitive' or 'backward' by mainstream society and policies, reinforcing prejudice and political marginalization towards them. Despite these challenges, tribal communities continue to struggle to protect their identity and display extraordinary resilience. They have successfully fought for separate states like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, which shows the significant success of their political struggle. They are reviving their traditional knowledge systems, which marks their cultural resurgence and their emergence as 'ecological warriors' to protect the environment. This struggle is not merely a battle for survival but a vociferous claim to defend a specific way of life.

Objectives of the Research

The main objectives of this research are:

1. Underlining the uniqueness of tribal identity: To portray the egalitarian, non-patriarchal and casteless nature of the identity of the tribal community in contrast to the mainstream society.
2. Assessing the contemporary challenges: To assess the extent and impact of serious challenges such as loss of livelihood, culture and control over the 'Land, Water, Forest of the tribal community due to globalization, industrialization and the state-sponsored development model.

Research Methodology

The researcher has used a combination of both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

- **Qualitative aspects:** Literature review and potentially case studies have been studied for in-depth analysis of traditional knowledge, cultural heritage, conflicts and psychological trauma of tribal communities.
- **Quantitative aspects:** Government reports, census data and statistical analysis have been used to support factual claims such as displacement figures (40% displaced), percentage living below the poverty line (45% rural) and population figures (8.6%).

Analysis of Data

The Adivasi community, constituting approximately 8.6% of India's total population¹, maintains a distinct identity rooted in its unique socio-cultural structure, which is increasingly under threat in the 21st century. This section offers an in-depth analysis of the nature of their identity, the multifaceted contemporary challenges they face, and their remarkable resilience and resistance.

1. The Distinctive Nature of Adivasi Identity

The bedrock of Adivasi identity stands in stark contrast to the tenets of mainstream Indian society, forming the initial point of conflict and struggle.

- **Egalitarianism and Absence of Caste:** The Adivasi social structure is fundamentally egalitarian with a complete absence of the caste system, which they regard as a form of racism. This structural equality challenges the deep-rooted hierarchy of non-Adivasi society.
- **Relaxed Patriarchy and Gender Autonomy:** Their identity is characterized by a relaxed patriarchal structure, which grants women greater freedom in personal matters such as divorce and remarriage. The presence of matriarchal tendencies in some communities further distinguishes their social dynamics from the generally rigid patriarchy of the mainstream.
- **The Trinity of 'Jal, Jangal, Zamin':** Their unique way of life is intrinsically linked to the forest, land, and water. This connection is not merely economic but forms the essence of their cultural heritage and distinctive way of life.

2. Contemporary Challenges: Dispossession, Exploitation, and Marginalization

The forces of modernization, development, and globalization have converged to pose unprecedented threats to the Adivasi existence.

A. Development-Induced Displacement and Land Alienation

- **Scale of Displacement:** The ideology of 'development' has led to large-scale land acquisition for mining projects and big dams (like Sardar Sarovar). A staggering nearly 40% of all people displaced since independence belong to the tribal community. The research findings indicate that almost all people displaced since independence are from this community.
- **Socio-Economic Destruction:** This displacement is the single most serious threat, causing the destruction of traditional livelihoods and cultural heritage. It forces Adivasis to become migrant laborers in cities, leading to extreme poverty and severe psychological trauma.
- **Legal Failure:** The weak implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, has failed to secure their land rights and protect them from this ongoing dispossession, highlighting a major governance failure.

B. Economic Crisis and Exploitation

- **High Poverty Rates:** The economic distress is evidenced by extremely high poverty rates: 45% in rural areas and 35% in urban areas of the tribal community live below the poverty line. In states like Jharkhand, more than a quarter of the population faces extreme poverty.
- **Market Forces and Indebtedness:** Tribal communities are victims of deep exploitation at the hands of market forces. Historically, they have been trapped in deep debt due to high interest rates, which forces them to mortgage their land or work as bonded laborers.

C. Social Stigma and Political Marginalization

- **Stereotyping and Prejudice:** Mainstream society and its policies often portray Adivasis as 'primitive' or 'backward'. This conservatism and social stigma reinforce deep-seated prejudice and political marginalization towards them.
- **Political Exclusion:** This marginalization means that Adivasi voices are often excluded from policy-making, making their situation more dire

3. Adivasi Resilience and Resistance

Despite these enormous challenges, Adivasi communities display extraordinary resilience and actively struggle to preserve their identity. This resistance is a crucial element of their contemporary narrative.

- **Political Assertion and Statehood:** The successful struggle for separate states like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh is a significant success and a powerful symbol of their political struggle and assertion of their distinct identity.
- **Cultural Resurgence and Traditional Knowledge:** They are reviving their traditional knowledge systems. This marks a profound cultural resurgence and a conscious effort to resist cultural degradation.
- **Ecological Warriorhood:** The Adivasi community is emerging as 'ecological warriors' to protect the environment, linking their struggle for identity with the broader environmental movement. Their fight is not just a battle for survival but a vociferous claim to defend a specific way of life based on harmony with nature.

In conclusion, the analysis reveals that the struggle for Adivasi identity is essentially a confrontation between an egalitarian, nature-dependent way of life and the forces of market-oriented globalization and a flawed development model. Their resilience, demonstrated through political success and cultural assertion, positions them as active warriors for their rights, not merely victims of development.

Conclusion and Future Direction

The struggle for tribal identity in the 21st century is primarily centred around the challenges posed by the ideology of development and market-oriented globalisation, which has led to large-scale exploitation and displacement of their land, livelihood and cultural life. Stereotypes and political marginalization by mainstream society have made their situation more dire. However, the creation of new states like Jharkhand, their vocal movement to protect traditional knowledge and their resilience in preserving their distinct cultural systems (such as gender equality) prove that tribal communities are not just victims of development but also active warriors for their identity and rights.

Future directions and Inclusive development model: Adopt sustainable development models prioritizing tribal concerns. Enhanced enforcement of legal rights: Ensure complete implementation of the Forest Rights Act. Integration of traditional knowledge: Respectfully integrate tribal knowledge into education, healthcare, and environmental policy. Political empowerment: Guarantee equitable representation of tribal voices in policy-making. Through these efforts, tribal identity can be preserved, helping India move towards a more egalitarian and inclusive nation.

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